

NEWS

DENOMINATIONS

Grace Brethren Split Over 'Doctrinal Drift'

In some denominations, it takes issues such as the ordination of practicing homosexuals to cause a split. In the case of the 40,000-member Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches (FGBC), the catalyst was the doctrine of trine

(three-fold) baptism.

At the annual meeting of the FGBC, held in August, dissenters announced that the Conservative Grace Brethren Association (CGBA), in formation since 1989, was breaking away. According to John Whitcomb, president of the CGBA board, 25 congregations have already sided with the new association, and an additional 20 or so are actively exploring the possibility.

A main doctrinal distinctive of Grace Brethren churches, who trace their roots to the early 1700s, has been the

practice of trine baptism. In accordance with the doctrine, church membership requires that believers be immersed three times, once for each person of the godhead.

In 1964, however, the FGBC decided to let individual churches set policies regarding acceptance of members. At this year's meeting, said 1992 FGBC moderator David Plaster, the fellowship reaffirmed the 1964 policy. "Churches must continue to practice only trine baptism," said Plaster, "but they can receive believers on a basis other than trine immersion baptism."

Conservative alarm

The CGBA's Whitcomb maintains, however, that the FGBC's policy is too permissive and removes any meaningful basis for cooperation among Grace Brethren churches. He says the policy signifies a drift among Grace Brethren churches away from their conservative theological roots.

A press release issued by CGBA director John Zielasko cites other problems, including "compromises of doctrinal integrity" and "questionable theological trends" at Grace Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana, the training ground for Grace Brethren pastors and missionaries.

Whitcomb was dismissed from Grace Seminary in 1990 after teaching there for 39 years. He maintains there is "alarm among conservative pastors and laymen" over an "irreversible downward trend of commitment to everything else we believe." He decries drifts away from hard-line stands on "premillennialism, creationism, and male leadership at home and church as opposed to evangelical feminism."

Plaster, vice-president of academic affairs at Grace College and Grace Seminary, contends that the seminary's theological convictions have not wavered. He does acknowledge a change in methodology, a change that preceded Whitcomb's departure. Said Plaster, "We continue to teach our own convictions, but our students are required to read materials from opposing viewpoints. Dr. Whitcomb objects to that."

The CGBA made a bid to become a cooperating organization of the FGBC, but it was rejected by voting delegates, who cited the new group's adversarial nature. Nevertheless, spokesmen from both sides say the split has been amicable and that kindness has prevailed over sharp words and feelings of anger.

The CGBA is calling on like-minded believers to attend a conference in October for the purpose of forming a new fellowship of Grace Brethren churches.

By Randy Frame.



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CONFLICT

Trouble at Grace: Making Waves or Guarding the Truth?

Many around the country associated with Grace Theological Seminary and Grace College in Winona Lake, Indiana, refer to former seminary professor John Whitcomb as "Mr. Grace." For over 38



Whitcomb: Fired after 38 years.

years, Whitcomb taught at Grace, the seminary of the Grace Brethren fellowship of churches.

But in February, just a few months short of his scheduled retirement, Whitcomb was relieved of his teaching responsibilities. In a letter sent to seminary students, alumni, and pastors, Grace Seminary president John Davis stated that Whitcomb for some time "has been a source of division in the seminary and college resulting from off-campus and on-campus activities that have fallen well short of propriety and God-honoring sensitivity."

Davis is a former student of Whitcomb's; the two are long-time friends, colleagues, and coauthors. But they could not disagree more in their analyses of what is happening at the school. Their dispute illustrates the tension in Christian higher education between faith and learning (see previous article).

Breaking from tradition?

Whitcomb maintains some faculty members hold theological and doctrinal views that seriously deviate from Grace's traditional emphases, including biblical inerrancy, premillennialism, and biblical creationism. (The school officially maintains a young-earth, six 24-hour-day view of Creation.)

In various speaking engagements and in other contacts with those associated with Grace, Whitcomb has been candid in his analysis—out of concern, he says,

for the seminary he considers home. In a letter responding to the Davis epistle, Whitcomb writes, "Do we angrily dismiss a surgeon who points to cancer cells within our body which we do not want to see?"

Davis charged in his letter that Whitcomb's problems with his colleagues, though "conveniently wrapped in theological language," were mainly "personal or relational." Davis conceded in an interview that this was "a judgment call," one he would like to have back. He said he believes Whitcomb is sincere in believing Grace has serious theological problems.

But Davis strongly maintains Whitcomb's conclusions are misguided, that Whitcomb "has dramatized and exaggerated issues" and "perpetrated inaccurate information," in part by issuing unsupported allegations. Some of these allegations, Davis noted, surround faculty who have long departed Grace.

Part of the disagreement appears to surround theological judgment. One professor at Grace, for example, maintains that Genesis 1:1 states a theme, and that the narrative begins with verse 2. According to Whitcomb, such an interpretation is incompatible with the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation. Davis disagrees.

The two also appear to hold different views of administrative responsibility. Davis cited a case in which a professor who, after discussions with the administration, clarified ambivalent teachings to bring them in line with Grace's doctrine. Said Davis, "[Whitcomb's] approach to administrative problems is immediate surgery and radical firings. Anything short of that is not acceptable."

Davis added that the faculty at Grace have recently drafted and signed a major statement affirming what the seminary has always affirmed. The occasion, he said, was to respond to Whitcomb's allegations. If Whitcomb is right, said Davis, the question becomes, "Are all these faculty members outright liars?"

Whitcomb maintains, however, that Davis is "sweeping [the school's problems] under the rug. And he believes the situation at Grace is not isolated, that schools all over the country are falling away from long-cherished doctrines. Many of those associated with Grace, no doubt, are now examining the evidence in an effort to determine whose perspective on the current conflict best represents the truth. □

Conference Reports

The Herald Newsline has been inundated with calls to learn of the actions taken by the Conservative Grace Brethren Association as well as the Fellowship Council. The following reports are unedited and complete.

Business Session, Wednesday, July 30, 1992.

Recommendation on the Application of the C.G.B.A.

As required by the Bylaws, the Fellowship Council reviewed carefully and discussed at length the application by the Conservative Grace Brethren Association for recognition as a cooperating organization by the FGBC. The application was in order and the basic qualifications for consideration were met. However, the Fellowship Council does not recommend the CGBA for such recognition. This recommendation is based on the following:

1. There is little evidence that the CGBA wishes to function in the normal sense as a co-operating organization within the framework of the Fellowship.

The CGBA has an actively adversarial relationship with other existing organizations that already serve our Fellowship. Efforts on the part of these national boards to reconcile these differences have not as yet been successful.

The leadership of the CGBA, with its stated concerns in the area of baptism and church membership, was urged to participate in the forum process as established by the action of conference. The invitations were unanswered.

Sessions sponsored by the CGBA were closed to some members in good standing of the FGBC.

2. The Council has serious reservations about the methodology and ethical practices of the CGBA in its public meetings. The forum process established by the conference, the elected leadership of the conference, fellow elders within the FGBC have been unfairly treated.
3. The application of the CGBA as presented to the conference is technically complete. However, the Council notes that beyond the stated purposes as officially given to the Conference, the CGBA has a published list of other concerns which focus on matters which demonstrate a non-compliant stance toward the authority of the Fellowship and its decisions.

The Fellowship Council regrets that it cannot recommend the approval of this application at this time. We urge every Grace Brethren elder and layman to work together to seek a restoration of relationships. Reconciliation does not require that we always agree with each other on various matters outside the parameters of our Statement of Faith. However, a basic commitment to one another is essential if the FGBC is to move ahead successfully.

Approved by the Fellowship Council

Business Session, Wednesday, August 5, 1992.

C.G.B.A.'s Response to Decisions at National Conference

The following is an announcement given on the floor of the National Conference of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, on Wednesday August 5, 1992, in Winona Lake, Indiana. This announcement was given by Pastor Gary Crandall of San José, California.

Mr. Moderator and fellow delegates:

I have been asked to speak as a representative of the Conservative Grace Brethren Association.

Given the positive vote of Conference on the Fellowship Council report on the baptism/membership issue, and given the negative vote of Conference on the Conservative Grace Brethren Association, I am announcing our departure.

Upon our departure, let me assure you that we do not leave with any ill-will toward you who remain. We regard you as true brothers and sisters in the Lord and precious in the sight of our God. Many of you we have known and loved for years. We do not cease to love you. But a forced fellowship is not a true fellowship. We, like you, want to be about our Father's business of fulfilling the Great Commission. To do so effectively, we believe we must work closest with those who share a fundamental agreement on theology, practice and missions. Harmony and unity are needed for such a great task, but they cannot come on the altar of compromise—it is a price too high. For us to remain would entail a compromise of our biblical convictions. We must each stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ—Who alone is the Head of the Church—and give an answer for what we have done and why we have done it. Our decision to depart, then, has not come about without much prayer and effort and tears.

We ask the same question as Amos: "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" and we realize there are a number of issues upon which we disagree. It is not simply a matter of the baptism/membership issue—although we do, of course, hold a biblical position which differs from yours.

We also take exception to the tendencies toward denominationalism inculcated by the Fellowship Council which takes to itself more and more power and control each year. We cannot continue under such a system.

The dual constitution approach, which allows for open churches to be planted, initiated by Home Missions, is proof in itself of the hitherto undeclared split in our ranks as well as a dual-minded approach, which James calls unstable (James 1:8).

In 1990, Foreign Missions officially embraced the policy of planting open churches, thus subjecting conservative missionaries to the increased tension of laboring on the field with others of different convictions.

Grace Schools is violating its own officially stated position of requiring trine immersion for membership by allowing Grace Brethren professors and Board members to hold the opposite view.

There is a new way of interpreting Scripture at work in our Fellowship. It looks at truth with a subjective eye and seeks to divide God's Word into levels of certainty or clarity.

For these and other reasons, many of us feel we can no longer in good conscience remain a part of this Fellowship.

It is our fervent desire that we follow the Apostle Paul's mandate to "guard the treasure which has been entrusted" to us that it might be perpetuated intact to the next generation. We believe that part of the biblical treasure entrusted to the Grace Brethren Fellowship is that of trine immersion, and that those who join the membership of a Grace Brethren Church should join us in the practice of what we are commanded to guard and perpetuate.

The full effect of our departure will take months, perhaps years, to tell. The number is not significant to our cause, as Joshua and Caleb learned, but whatever number we might be, we hope to work out significant and satisfactory details with representatives of the various agencies in the Fellowship.

We do not want to stay and argue over areas of convictions. That has not proven to be productive. We seek a new beginning and a fresh start. Our first meeting in the formative process for a new Fellowship will be this evening starting at 8:15 p.m. at the Presbyterian Church at 7th and Chestnut in Winona Lake. All like-minded brothers and sisters are encouraged to meet with us.

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